

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY PANAMA IMMEDIATE

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TAGS: PFOR, PN

SUBJECT: WASHINGTON POST AND NY TIMES EDITORIALS

1. HERewith TEXT OF EDITORIAL FROM WEDNESDAY MAY 18
WASHINGTON POST. QUOTE. A BREAKTHROUGH WITH PANAMA?
PANAMA'S VOLUBLE PRESIDENT, GEN. OMAR TORRIJOS, NOW SAYS IN
AN INTERVIEW THAT HE WOULD LET THE UNITED STATES HELP
GUARANTEE THE CANAL'S NEUTRALITY AFTER IT PASSES BACK UNDER
PANAMANIAN CONTROL. THIS CONCESSION WOULD SEEM TO ADDRESS
THE UNITED STATES' PRIME DEMAND IN NEGOTIATIONS FOR A NEW
TREATY TO REPLACE THE GROSSLY UNJUST TREATY THAT TEDDY
ROOSEVELT IMPOSED IN 1903. THAT DEMAND IS THAT WHEN THE
NEW TREATY EXPIRES, PRESUMABLE AROUND THE YEAR 2000,
WASHINGTON WILL STILL HAVE A ROLE IN THE DEFENSE OF THE
CANAL.

WILL THE GENERAL'S NEGOTIATORS SPELL OUT PRIVATELY AND
OFFICIALLY, IN THE TALKS RESUMING HERE TODAY, WHAT HE HAS
HINTED PUBLICLY? WILL AMERICAN NEGOTIATORS BE READY TO
OFFER MATCHING CONCESSIONS? IF SO, THE CARTER ADMINISTRA-
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TION MAY BE CLOSER TO A RESOLUTION OF THE CORROSIVE PANAMA
ISSUE THAN AT ANY POINT SINCE TALKS BEGAN...IN 1964. THE
DIPLOMATIC PRIZE GLITTERS. BUT EXPERIENCE COUNSELS CAUTION,
FOR THIS IS NOT A MATTER THAT CAN BE HANDLED IN COZY

EXCHANGES BETWEEN DIPLOMATS; IN BOTH COUNTRIES THE ISSUE IS
DEEPLY ROOTED IN DOMESTIC POLITICS.

GEN. TORRIJOS'S REPORTED READINESS TO COMPROMISE MAY NOT ARISE EXCLUSIVELY, AS HE SUGGESTS, FROM DEFERENCE TO HIS LATIN NEIGHBORS. IT MAY ALSO ARISE FROM HIS NEED TO REASSURE THE NUMEROUS PANAMANIAN WHO, LACKING FULL CONFIDENCE IN THE GENERAL AND PERHAPS ALSO IN THEMSELVES, HESITATE TO TAKE THE FULL BURDEN OF THE CANAL UPON PANAMA. THE THREAT TO PANAMANIAN RATIFICATION OF A NEW TREATY HAS ALWAYS COME LESS FROM THE RADICAL LEFT THAN THE CONSERVATIVE RIGHT.

IN THIS COUNTRY, THE RIGHT HAS WIDELY PROMOTED THE WRONG-HEADED NOTION THAT THE CANAL ZONE IS AMERICAN SOVEREIGN TERRITORY THAT SHOULD NOT BE "GIVEN AWAY" TO PANAMA. IN FACT, THE 1903 TREATY BESTOWED "RIGHTS IN PERPETUITY...AS IF (THE UNITED STATES) WERE THE SOVEREIGN." IT IS THESE RIGHTS--AS DISTINCT FROM ACTUAL SOVEREIGNTY, WHICH TECHNICALLY WAS NEVER SURRENDERED BY PANAMA--THAT WOULD BE RETURNED ON AGREED TERMS IN A NEW TREATY. BUT "RETENTION" OF A "SOVEREIGNTY" THAT THE UNITED STATES NEVER TRULY ACQUIRED HAS BECOME, TO MANY AMERICANS, A POINT OF PROFOUND NATIONAL HONOR AND PRIDE.

SOME NEW POLLS INDICATE THAT POPULAR SUPPORT FOR "RETENTION" IS GROWING. BY ONE SENATE VOTE COUNT, THERE ARE AT LEAST 43 RELATIVELY HARD VOTES LINED UP AGAINST A NEW TREATY, EVEN ONE EMBODYING THE CONCESSION HINTED AT BY GEN. TORRIJOS. IF MR. CARTER IS SERIOUS ABOUT PRESSING FOR A NEW TREATY, HE MUST PREPARE FOR WHAT WILL UNQUESTIONABLY UNCLASSIFIED

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BE THE MOST WRACKING POLITICAL COMBAT OF HIS NEW ADMINISTRATION. UNQUOTE.

2. HERewith TEXT OF MAY 18 NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE BY GRAHAM HOVEY. QUOTE. PANAMA APPARENTLY RELAXES STAND ON CANAL, RAISING HOPES FOR PACT. WASHINGTON, MAY 17. CARTER ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS SAW IMPROVED CHANCES TODAY FOR A NEW PANAMA CANAL TREATY AS A RESULT OF A REPORTED CONCESSION--PANAMA MIGHT AGREE TO AN EXTENDED UNITED STATES DEFENSE ROLE FOR THE WATERWAY.

THE ISSUE CONCERNS DEFENSE OF THE CANAL AFTER THE EXPIRATION OF THE PROJECTED NEW TREATY, PRESUMABLY IN THE YEAR 2000, WHEN FULL CONTROL OF THE WATERWAY AND THE CANAL ZONE WOULD PASS TO PANAMA.

IN A NEWSPAPER REPORT FROM PANAMA TODAY, GEN. OMAR TORRIJOS HERRERA, THE PANAMANIAN LEADER, WAS AGREEABLE TO THE PRINCIPLE OF WASHINGTON'S RIGHT TO INTERVENE AGAINST

A THIRD COUNTRY IN ANY STRUGGLE TO PROTECT THE NEUTRALITY OF THE CANAL.

PREVIOUSLY, THE PANAMANIAN OFFICIAL POSITION WAS THAT THE UNITED NATIONS SHOULD BE THE GUARANTOR FOR THE CANAL'S FUTURE NEUTRALITY.

"IT'S A REAL BREAKTHROUGH IF HE MEANS IT," SAID AN ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL INVOLVED IN THE NEGOTIATIONS. "IT'S A HEL OF A CONCESSION IF HE MEANS IT."

THE GENERAL WAS ALTERNATELY CONCILIATORY AND BELLICOSE IN PRONOUNCEMENTS ON THE CANAL ISSUE BEFORE THE RESUMPTION OF NEGOTIATIONS IN WASHINGTON LAST WEEK. THE TALKS, NOW IN RECESS WHILE PANAMA'S NEGOTIATORS CONSULT GENERAL TORRIJOS ABOUT THE LATEST AMERICAN PROPOSALS, ARE EXPECTED TO GET UNDER WAY AGAIN HERE LATER IN THE WEEK.
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THE AMERICAN NEGOTIATORS HAD EMPHASIZED THAT NO AGREEMENT WOULD BE APPROVED BY CONGRESS OR ACCEPTED BY THE PUBLIC THAT DID NOT PROVIDE FOR A UNITED STATES SHARE IN DEFENDING THE NEUTRALITY OF THE CANAL EVEN AFTER EXPIRATION OF THE TREATY.

IN A SECRET, UNSCHEDULED NEGOTIATING SESSION IN WASHINGTON IN MID-MARCH, THE AMERICAN SIDE PROPOSED TREATY LANGUAGE ON THIS MATTER CALCULATED TO ALLOW CLEARLY FOR AN AMERICAN SECURITY ROLE WHILE GIVING LEAST OFFENSE TO PANAMA'S SENSITIVITY ABOUT INTERVENTION.

GENERAL TORRIJOS HAD CATEGORICALLY REJECTED THE IDEA OF ANY SECURITY ARRANGEMENT BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES, HOWEVER, SAYING PANAMA WOULD BE WILLING ONLY TO VEST A GUARANTEE OF THE CANAL'S NEUTRALITY IN THE UNITED NATIONS.

DIPLOMATS STUDYING THE GENERAL'S REMARKS, IN AN INTERVIEW PRINTED IN THE WASHINGTON POST, WERE STRUCK BY HIS CAREFUL DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN A UNITED STATES RIGHT TO INTERVENE AGAINST "A THIRD COUNTRY," WHICH HE NOW ACCEPTS, AND HIS REJECTION OF "ANYTHING IN WRITING" THAT COULD JUSTIFY AN AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN PANAMA ITSELF.

DEFENSE AND STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS SAY PRIVATELY THAT THE ONLY REAL THREAT TO THE CANAL'S SECURITY IS SABOTAGE, NOT MILITARY ATTACK. THUS, PANAMA'S CONCESSION ON INTER-

VENTION AGAINST THIRD COUNTRIES WOULD NOT BE LIKELY TO SATISFY FULLY CONGRESSIONAL OPPONENTS OF ANY SURRENDER OF

AMERICAN CONTROL OVER THE CANAL AND THE CANAL ZONE.

IN HIS DRIVE TO WIN SUPPORT FOR PANAMA'S POSITION ON THE
TREATY, GENERAL TORRIJOS HAS CULTIVATED THE GOVERNMENTS OF
COLOMBIA, VENEZUELA, MEXICO AND COSTA RICA. HE PRAISED
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THE PRESIDENTS OF THOSE COUNTRIES AS MEN WHO HAD "BURNED
THEIR SHIPS FOR ANOTHER MAN'S CAUSE." UNQUOTE. CHRISTOPHER

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